

Every minute in the world, 10 children and 10 adults die from air pollution.

Most of the state aid, when it comes to Western Balkan countries' energy sector, goes to coal-fired power plants and coal mines, which are huge pollutants and lack incentives for environmentally friendly solutions, says HEAL's Srdjan Kukolj.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, an adviser to this European NGO for the Balkan region points out that thousands of people are suffering from air, water, soil pollution due to air pollution in the region, and that the region's authorities are not doing enough to improve the situation.

How many people in the region are aware of the air pollution (and therefore the whole environment) in the Balkans?

Citizens of the Western Balkans are aware of the extent of air pollution in this region, and we can see from the examples of more frequent public gatherings such as protests or petitions, the increased number of news reports via social networks in which citizens highlight the problem of air pollution in the place where and more and more people are using official air quality data or apps on phones to inform and protect their own health. The media also frequently report on air quality in the region, which is probably an indication of how much the public is interested in the topic.

Civil society organizations as well as international organizations have launched voluntary citizens' initiatives in the Western Balkans region aimed at independent measurement of air quality in order to increase the visibility of this problem and to advocate for better air quality.

Although the authorities often dispute the accuracy of the data collected during these independent measurements, we must say that these small devices are not in the ranks of official air quality monitoring stations, but we should not neglect them as they are devices with advanced technology whose results ultimately deviate in small percentage of official. These small devices are a product of the global scientific community, created out of the need for real-time air quality data to be available, because this is the only way citizens can know at which point they need to reduce activity and prevent exposure to high concentrations of air pollutants.

Which categories of population are most affected?

Poor air quality is most damaging to sensitive categories of the population such as babies, children, pregnant women, chronic patients and people whose exposure to high levels of air pollution falls into the occupational exposure category.

The vulnerability of these categories of population, but not only of them, is mostly reflected in the number of hospitalizations caused by respiratory or cardiovascular symptoms, the number of days of limited activity or work capacity, the number of days with symptoms of bronchitis or asthma, but also in the number of premature deaths.

Each type of care and care provision is attributed to the additional medical expense resulting from excessive air pollution, and the billing account goes to the public health address.

What are the biggest air pollutants in the Western Balkans region - heating systems, old cars...?

Data differ from country to country when it comes to the Western Balkans region, non-EU countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia and Serbia). There are a number of problems that are on the way to developing comprehensive scientific studies on the estimation of pollutants, types and sources because simply these data are not publicly available - and continuing this series, we should mention the occasional absence of continuous measurement of air quality, which in the case of scientific studies is challenging

The fact is that the roads of the Western Balkans contain a large number of obsolete and diesel vehicles, that urban transport networks do not meet the urban conditions and needs of citizens, that many households are not connected to district heating networks and that citizens burn wood or coal most often for heating or cooking purposes.

Of course, due to the fact that we live in a region where we have a large number of arable land, there is also a problem with crop burning, and satellite imagery certainly confirms that we are talking about established practices that are inherited, but also the fires that are often the result of these activities. Agriculture, industrial and construction machinery and industrial transport contribute significantly to the total air pollution.

How much is being done to improve the situation in these spheres of everyday life?

Not enough is being done. We can see that the governments of all countries in the Western Balkans region are channeling most of the state aid towards the energy sector- coal-fired power plants and coal mines, which are huge pollutants of air, water and land, while on the other hand lack incentives or incentives for citizens, for example through the acquisition of new generation cars or the increase of the urban and intercity transport network and the increase in district central heating, or the increase in the number pedestrian zones and green areas or paths for cyclists...

Since the issue of the progress of the countries of this region would not be viewed only through the everyday life of citizens, but through the strategic approach of governments in the process of solving the problems of air pollution and the environment in general, then the question of the implementation of existing laws is only imposed, ie. how much states have done to achieve the goals defined in the strategies and action plans that have integrated activities and indicators on public health and the environment, including air quality. Or how many large industrial pollutants who are permanently banned from law enforcement, or when we can expect to develop more ambitious energy transition strategies to increase the cost-effectiveness of investment, which means that we must prioritize protecting the health of citizens and reducing the huge additional costs that the energy sector has it imposes on work the protection of public health and the environment.

While the world is working on the development of non-polluting alternative energy sources, thermal power plants continue to force up in the Balkans. How much are they polluting, how much is their modernization and filtering of everything they throw out and what are the Balkan potentials for other energy sources?

The Energy Community report, released this year, shows that in the Western Balkans, and in particular in BiH, Kosovo and Serbia, most of the state aid in the form of subsidies was directed to coal-fired electricity, which is the opposite the need to make the additional decarbonisation efforts necessary in this region. The total amount of direct subsidies amounted to approximately EUR 500 million for the period 2015-2017. , while the cost of

indirect subsidies to the coal sector in 2017 alone amounted to EUR 1.06 billion.

It is certain that this data shows how much the Western Balkan countries give priority to the coal-fired electricity sector over renewable energy sources.

Air pollution from fossil fuel thermal power plants or other emitters knows no boundaries. Coal thermal power plants in the Western Balkans – although not EU member states – pollute the air in the Union countries by emitting worryingly high levels of harmful substances. The greatest impact was observed on neighboring Romania, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece and Croatia, but also on more remote countries such as Poland, Germany, Czech Republic and Austria.

Back in 2005, the Western Balkan countries signed the Energy Community Agreement, which aims to integrate the European Union's energy market with that of its neighbors. The agreement set a deadline by 2018 for the Western Balkan countries to comply with European Union legislation on pollution control. However, the necessary steps towards healthier and more renewable energy sources, investment and modernization in energy production across the Western Balkans are largely delayed.

In the Western Balkans, 16 obsolete coal-fired power plants threaten public health with enormous air pollution, affecting people in the region, the EU and beyond. Each year, this pollution causes 3,000 premature deaths, 8,000 cases of bronchitis in children and other chronic diseases that cost the health systems and the economy total, from 6.1 to 11.5 billion euros. The largest burden on health costs is borne by the EU, in the amount of EUR 3.1 to 5.8 billion. At the same time, the economic burden for the Western Balkan countries is estimated at EUR 1.9-3.6 billion per year. This is data from the Chronic Coal Pollution report we released earlier this year, and the data is for 2016.

The news that made us happy is that from the end of 2021, the European Investment Bank will not lend to the energy sector and projects focused on fossil fuels, but on the other hand Chinese investments in the coal power generation sector raise concerns about protecting the health of the citizens and the environment in the Western region Balkans and beyond. The Energy Community needs to be strengthened to implement existing pollution control measures in a timely manner and to adopt additional legislation in the Energy Community Agreement. The European Commission must give priority to pollution and air quality control as part of the EU accession process. Western Balkan coal-fired power plants are old, inefficient and operate below environmental standards.

Which cities can be singled out as particularly polluted in the region, to what extent do you think they are working to improve them?

Large cities in the region, such as Belgrade, Sarajevo and Skopje, have been present in the world media for years precisely because of excessive air pollution, which is most pronounced during the heating season due to increased consumption of fossil fuels, which is combined with pollution already generated by industries, the energy sector, agriculture and transport.

But it is worth mentioning Tuzla and Lukavac in BiH or Smederevo, Pancevo and Sabac in Serbia or Pristina in Kosovo. Of course, this list is much longer, but in many cities or villages there are no official air quality monitoring stations and therefore we do not know the real situation in the whole region.

In the end, what is the future of the Balkans if this continues?

Every minute, every day in the world, a child dies of airborne illness, and at the same time, ten adults die prematurely due to polluted air breathing throughout their lives – the citizens of the Western Balkans are part of these statistics, but citizens do not want to be part of the statistics but want this painful turn the fact into creating more effective policies for a healthier and cleaner environment.

Both clean air and clean water are fundamentally important to the human life and well-being of every human being. A person can survive several days without water and only a few minutes without air.

The governments of the Western Balkan countries need to increase the level of cooperation with EU countries so that they can create more effective policies to protect citizens' health, the environment and mitigate climate change through examples of good practice and new knowledge.

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